

BEFORE THE TAIN

HOW THE TAIN BO CUAILNGE WAS FOUND AGAIN

THE POETS of Ireland one day were gathered around [Senchán Torpéist](#), to see if they could recall the ‘[Táin Bó Cuailnge](#)’ in its entirety. But they all said they knew only parts of it.

Senchán asked which of his pupils, in return for his blessing, would travel to the land of [Letha](#) to learn the version of the Táin that a certain sage took eastward with him in exchange for the book [Cuilmenn](#). Emine, Ninéne’s grandson, set out for the east with Senchán’s son Muirgen. It happened that the grave of Fergus [mac Roich](#) was on their way. They came upon the gravestone at Enloch in Connacht. Muirgen sat down at Fergus’s gravestone, and the others left him for a while and went looking for a house for the night.

Muirgen chanted a poem to the gravestone as though it were Fergus himself. He said to it:

‘If this your royal rock
were your own self mac Roich
halted here with sages
searching for a roof
Cuailnge we’d recover
plain and perfect Fergus.’

A great mist suddenly formed around him — for the space of three days and nights he could not be found. And the figure of Fergus approached him in fierce majesty, with a head of brown hair, in a green cloak and a redembroidered hooded tunic, with gold-hilted sword and bronze blunt sandals. Fergus recited him the whole Táin, how everything had happened, from start to finish. Then they went back to Senchán with their story, and he rejoiced over it.

[However, there are some who say](#) that the story was told to Senchán himself after he had gone on a fast to certain saints of the seed of Fergus. This seems reasonable.

[There are seven tales that prepare](#) for the [Táin Bó Cuailnge](#):

How Conchobor was Begotten, and how he took the
Kingship of Ulster
The Pangs of Ulster
Exile of the Sons of Uisliu
How Cúchulainn was Begotten
Cúchulainn’s Courtship of Emer and his Training in
Arms with Scáthach
The Death of Aife’s One Son
The Quarrel of the Two Pig-keepers and how the Bulls were Begotten

Some say that the tales before the Táin should also include Cúchulainn's coming to the house of Culann the smith, Cúchulainn's taking up arms and mounting into his chariot, and Cúchulainn's journey to the boy-troop in Emain Macha. But these three tales are given in the body of the Táin.



Conchobar



HOW CONCHOBOR WAS BEGOTTEN, AND HOW HE TOOK THE KINGSHIP OF ULSTER

NES the daughter of **Eochaid Sálbuide of the yellow heel** was sitting outside Emain with her royal women about her. The druid Cathbad from the Tratraige of Mag Inis passed by, and the girl said to him:

‘What is the present hour lucky for?’

‘For begetting a king on a queen,’ he said.

The queen asked him if that were really true, and the druid swore by god that it was: a son conceived at that hour would be heard of in Ireland for ever. The girl saw no other male near, and she took him inside with her.

She grew heavy with a child. It was in her womb for three years and three months. **And at the feast of Othar she was delivered.**

The boy Conchobar was reared by Cathbad and was known as Cathbad's son. **Conchobar** rose to great dignity seven years after his birth, when he took the kingship of Ulster This is how it happened.

His mother Nes was living by herself. [Fergus mac Roich](#) was king in Ulster at that time, and he sought Nes for his wife.

‘Only if I get something in return,’ she said. ‘Give my son the kingship for a year, so that they can call his son the son of a king.’

‘Let her have that,’ everyone said. ‘You’ll still be king, even though we call him by the name of king.’

So the woman slept with Fergus, and Conchobor was called ‘king of Ulster.’ Nes immediately set about advising her son [and his foster-parents](#) and everyone in his household. They were to steal everything from one half of the people and give it away to the other half. She gave the Ulster warriors her own gold and silver — all this was in hopes of what her son would get.

In a year to the same day the time was up. Fergus called back his pledge.

‘We’ll have to talk about this,’ the men of Ulster said.

They gathered together and talked: they felt greatly insulted that Fergus had given them over, like a dowry, while they were grateful to Conchobor for all he had given them. They decided, ‘What Fergus sold let it stay sold; what Conchobor bought let it stay bought.’

In this way Fergus parted with the kingship of Ulster and Cathbad’s son Conchobor became high king of a [province](#) of Ireland.

Ulster grew to worship Conchobor. So high was their regard for him that every man in Ulster that took a girl in marriage let her sleep the first night with Conchobor, so as to have him first in the family. There was no wiser being in the world. He never gave a judgment until it was ripe, for fear it might be wrong and the crops worsen. There was no harder warrior in the world, but because he was to produce a son they never let him near danger. Heroes and battle-veterans and brave champions went before him into every fight and fray, to keep him from harm. Any Ulsterman who gave him a bed for the night gave him his wife as well to sleep with.

His household was very handsome. He had three houses: Craebruad, the Red Branch; Tête Brec, [the Twinkling Hoard](#); and Craebderg, the Ruddy Branch. The severed heads and spoils were kept in the Craebderg. The kings sat in the Craebruad, red being for royalty. All the javelins and shields and swords were kept in the Tête Brec; the place twinkled with the gold of sword-hilts and the gold and silver glimmering on the necks and coils of grey javelins, on shield-plates and shield-rims, and in the sets of goblets, cups and drinking-horns.

Ochain was there, Conchobor’s shield, the Ear of

Beauty — it had four gold borders around it;

Cúchulainn’s black shield Dubán;

Lámthapad — the swift to hand — belonging to Conall

Cernach;

Ochnech belonging to Flidais;

Furbaide's red-gold Orderg;
Cúscraid's triumphant sword Coscrach;
death-dealing Echtach that belonged to Amargin;
Condere's angry Ir;
Nuadu's Caimmel — a bright torch;
Fergus's hacking sword Leochain;
the fearful Uathach that belonged to Dubthach;
Errge's Lettach;
Menn's Brattach;
Noisiu's joyful Luithech;
Nithach the wounder belonging to Laegaire;
the bloody Croda of Cormac;
Sencha's resonant shield Sciatharglan;
Celtchar's Comla Catha, the Door of Battle; and other shields beyond counting.

Also beyond counting were Conchobor's household and his houses. There were one hundred and fifty inner rooms, each of which held three couples. The houses and rooms were panelled with red yew. In the centre of the house was Conchobor's own room, guarded by screens of copper, with bars of silver and gold birds on the screens, and precious jewels in the birds' heads for eyes. Over Conchobor's head was a rod of silver with three apples of gold, for keeping order over the throng. If it shook, or he raised his voice, everyone fell into such a respectful silence you would hear a needle drop to the floor. At any given time in Conchobor's room there were thirty noble heroes drinking out of [Gerg's vat](#), which was always kept full. This was Ol nguala, the 'coal vat' that Conchobor took with him from Gerg's Glen when he killed Gerg.

THE PANGS OF ULSTER

What caused the [pangs](#) of the men of Ulster?
[It is soon told.](#)

THERE was a very rich landlord in Ulster, Crunniuc mac Agnomain. He lived in a lonely place in the mountains with all his sons. His wife was dead. Once, as he was alone in the house, he saw a woman coming toward him there, and she was a fine woman in his eyes. She settled down and began working at once, as though she were well used to the house. When night came, she put everything in order without being asked. Then she slept with Crunniuc.

She stayed with him for a long while afterward, and there was never a lack of food or clothes or anything else under her care.

Soon, a fair was held in Ulster. Everyone in Ulster, men and women, boys and girls, went to the fair. Crunniuc set out for the fair with the rest, in his best clothes and in great vigour.

'It would be as well not to grow boastful or careless in anything you say,' the woman said

to him.

‘That isn’t likely,’ he said.

The fair was held. At the end of the day the king’s chariot was brought onto the field. His chariot and horses won. The crowd said that nothing could beat those horses.

‘My wife is faster,’ Crunniuc said.

He was taken immediately before the king and the woman was sent for. She said to the messenger:

‘It would be a heavy burden for me to go and free him now. I am full with child.’

‘Burden?’ the messenger said. ‘He will die unless you come.’

She went to the fair, and her pangs gripped her. She called out to the crowd:

‘A mother bore each one of you! Help me! Wait till my child is born.’

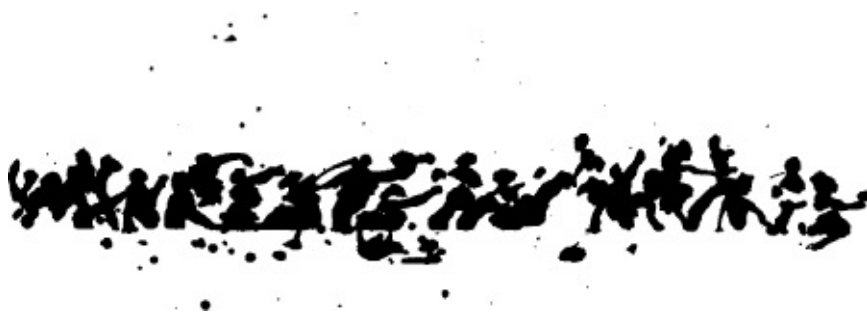
But she couldn’t move them.

‘Very well,’ she said. ‘A long-lasting evil will come out of this on the whole of Ulster.’

‘What is your name?’ the king said.

‘My name, and the name of my offspring,’ she said, ‘will be given to this place. I am Macha, daughter of Sainrith mac Imbaith.’

Then she raced the chariot. As the chariot reached the end of the field, she gave birth alongside it. She bore twins, a son and a daughter. The name Emain Macha, the Twins of Macha, comes from this. As she gave birth she screamed out that all who heard that scream would suffer from the same pangs for five days and four nights in their times of greatest difficulty. This affliction, ever afterward, seized all the men of Ulster who were there that day, and nine generations after them. Five days and four nights, or five nights and four days, the pangs lasted. For nine generations any Ulsterman in those pangs had no more strength than a woman on the bed of labour. Only three classes of people were free from the pangs of Ulster: the young boys of Ulster, the women, and Cúchulainn. Ulster was thus afflicted from the time of Crunniuc, the son of Agnoman, son of Curir Ulad, son of Fiatach mac Urmi, until the time of Furc, the son of Dallán, son of Mainech mac Lugdach. (It is from Curir Ulad that the province and people of Ulster — Ulaid — have their name.)



EXILE OF THE SONS OF UISLIU

What caused the exile of the sons of Uisliu?
It is soon told.

THE MEN of Ulster were drinking in the house of Conchobor's storyteller, Fedlimid mac Daill. Fedlimid's wife was overseeing everything and looking after them all. She was full with child. Meat and drink were passed round, and a drunken uproar shook the place. When they were ready to sleep the woman went to her bed. As she crossed the floor of the house the child screamed in her womb and was heard all over the enclosure. At that scream everyone in the house started up, staring at each other. Sencha mac Ailella said:

'No one move! Bring the woman here. We'll see what caused this noise.'

So the woman was brought before them. Her husband Fedlimid said:

'Woman,
what was that fierce shuddering sound
furious in your troubled womb?
The weird uproar at your waist
hurts the ears of all who hear it.
My heart trembles at some great terror
or some cruel injury.'

She turned distracted to the seer Cathbad:

'Fair-faced Cathbad, hear me
— prince, pure, precious crown,
grown huge in druid spells.
I can't find the fair words
that would shed the light of knowledge
for my husband Fedlimid,
even though it was the hollow
of my own womb that howled.
No woman knows what her womb bears.'

Then Cathbad said:

'A woman with twisted yellow tresses,
green-irised eyes of great beauty
and cheeks flushed like the foxglove
howled in the hollow of your womb.
I say that whiter than the snow
is the white treasure of her teeth;
[Parthian-red](#), her lip's lustre.
Ulster's chariot-warriors
will deal many a blow for her.
There howled in your troubled womb
a tall, lovely, long-haired woman.
Heroes will contend for her,
high kings beseech on her account;
then, west of Conchobor's kingdom

a heavy harvest of fighting men.
High queens will ache with envy
to see those lips of Parthian-red
opening on her pearly teeth,
and see her pure perfect body.'

Cathbad placed his hand on the woman's belly and the baby wriggled under it.
'Yes,' he said, 'there is a girl there. Derdriu shall be her name. She will bring evil.'
Then the daughter was born and Cathbad said:

'Much damage, Derdriu, will follow
your high fame and fair visage:
Ulster in your time tormented,
demure daughter of Fedlimid.

And later, too, jealousy
will dog you, woman like a flame,
and later still — listen well —
the three sons of Uisliu exiled.

Then again, in your lifetime,
a bitter blow struck in Emain.
Remorse later for that ruin
wrought by the great [son of Roech](#);

Fergus exiled out of Ulster
through your fault, fatal woman,
and the much-wept deadly wound
of Fiachna, Conchobor's son.

Your fault also, fatal woman,
Gerrce felled, Illadan's son,
and a crime that no less cries out,
the son of Durthacht, Eogan, struck.

Harsh, hideous deeds done
in anger at Ulster's high king,
and little graves everywhere
— a famous tale, Derdriu.'

'Kill the child!' the warriors said.

'No,' Conchobor said. 'The girl will be taken away tomorrow. I'll have her reared for me.
This woman I'll keep to myself.'

The men of Ulster didn't dare speak against him.

And so it was done. She was reared by Conchobor and grew into the loveliest woman in all Ireland. She was kept in a place set apart, so that no Ulsterman might see her until she was ready for Conchobor's bed. No one was allowed in the enclosure but her foster-father and her foster-mother, and Leborcham, tall and crooked, a satirist, who couldn't be kept out.

One day in winter, the girl's foster-father was skinning a milk-fed calf on the snow outside, to cook it for her. She saw a raven drinking the blood on the snow. She said to Leborcham:

'I could desire a man who had those three colours there: hair like the raven, cheeks like blood and his body like snow.'

'Good luck and success to you!' Leborcham said. 'He isn't too far away, but close at hand — Noisiu, Uisliu's son.'

'I'll be ill in that case,' she said, 'until I see him.'

This man Noisiu was chanting by himself one time near Emain, on the rampart of the stronghold. The chanting of the sons of Uisliu was very sweet. Every cow or beast that heard it gave two thirds more milk. Any person hearing it was filled with peace and music. Their deeds in war were great also: if the whole province of Ulster came at them at once, they could put their three backs together and not be beaten, their parrying and defence were so fine. Besides this they were swift as hounds in the chase, killing the wild beasts in flight.

While Noisiu was out there alone, therefore, she slipped out quickly to him and made as though to pass him and not recognize him.

'That is a fine heifer going by,' he said.

'As well it might,' she said. 'The heifers grow big where there are no bulls.'

'You have the bull of this province all to yourself,' he said, 'the king of Ulster.'

'Of the two,' she said, 'I'd pick a game young bull like you.'

'You couldn't,' he said. 'There is Cathbad's prophecy.'

'Are you rejecting me?'

'I am,' he said.

Then she rushed at him and caught the two ears of his head.

'Two ears of shame and mockery,' she said, 'if you don't take me with you.'

'Woman, leave me alone!' he said.

'You will do it,' she said, binding him.

A shrill cry escaped him at that. The men of Ulster nearby, when they heard it, started up staring at each other. Uisliu's other sons went out to quieten their brother.

'What is wrong?' they said. 'Whatever it is, Ulstermen shouldn't kill each other for it.'

He told them what had happened.

'Evil will come of this,' the warriors said. 'But even so, you won't be shamed as long as we live. We can bring her with us to some other place. There's no king in Ireland who would deny us a welcome.'

They decided on that. They left that night, with three times fifty warriors and three times fifty women and the same of hounds and menials. Derdriu was among them, mingling with the

rest.

They travelled about Ireland for a long time, under protection. Conchobor tried to destroy them often with ambushes and treachery. They went round southwestward from the red cataract at Es Ruaid, and to the promontory at Benn Etair, northeastward. But still the men of Ulster pursued them until they crossed the sea to the land of [Alba](#).

They settled there in the waste places. When the mountain game failed them they turned to take the people's cattle. A day came when the people of Alba went out to destroy them. Then they offered themselves to the king of Alba, who accepted them among his people as hired soldiers. They set their houses on the green. They built their houses so that no one could see in at the girl in case there might be killing on her account.

It happened that a steward came looking around their house early one morning. He saw the couple sleeping. Then he went and woke the king:

'I never found a woman fit for you until today,' he said. 'There is a woman with Noisiu mac [Uislemn](#) who is fit for a king over the Western World. If you have Noisiu killed, you can have the woman to sleep with,' the steward said.

'No,' the king said, 'but go and ask her every day in secret.'

He did this, but every day he came she told Noisiu about it that night. Since nothing could be done with her, the sons of [Uisliu](#) were ordered into all kinds of traps and dangerous battles to have them killed. But they were so hard in the carnage that nothing came of it.

They tried her one last time. Then the men of Alba were called together to kill them. She told Noisiu this.

'Go away from here,' she said. 'If you don't leave here this night, you will be dead tomorrow.'

So they left that night and reached an island in the sea.

This news reached Ulster.

'Conchobor,' everyone said, 'it would be shameful if the sons of Uisliu fell in enemy lands by the fault of a bad woman. Better to forgive and protect them — to save their lives and let them come home — than for enemies to lay them low.'

'Let them come,' Conchobor said. 'Send for them, with guarantees of safety.'

This news was brought to them.

'It is welcome,' they said. 'We'll go if Fergus comes as a pledge of safety, and Dubthach and Conchobor's son Cormac'

Then they went down with the messengers to the sea.

[So they were brought back to Ireland](#). But Fergus was stopped through Conchobor's cunning. He was invited to a number of ale feasts and, by an old oath, couldn't refuse. The sons of Uisliu had sworn they would eat no food in Ireland until they ate Conchobor's food first, so they were bound to go on. Fiacha, Fergus's son, went on with them, while Fergus and Dubthach stayed behind. The sons of Uisliu came to the green at Emain. Eogan mac Durthacht, king of Fernmag, was there: he had come to make peace with Conchobor, with whom he had long been

at enmity. He had been chosen to kill them. Conchobor's hired soldiers gathered around him so that the sons of Uisliu couldn't reach him. They stood in the middle of the green. The women settled on the ramparts of Emain.

Eogan crossed the green with his men. Fergus's son came and stood at Noisiu's side. Eogan welcomed Noisiu with the hard thrust of a great spear that broke his back. Fergus's son grasped Noisiu in his two arms and pulled him down and threw himself across him, and Noisiu was finished off through Fergus's son's body. Then the slaughter broke out all over the green. No one left except by spike of spear or slash of sword. Derdriu was brought over to Conchobor and stood beside him with her hands bound at her back.

Fergus was told of this, and Dubthach and Cormac. They came at once and did mighty deeds. Dubthach killed Maine, Conchobor's son. Fiachna, son of Conchobor's daughter Fedelm, was killed with a single thrust. Fergus killed Traighthén, Traiglethan's son, and his brother. Conchobor was outraged, and on a day soon afterward battle was joined between them, and three hundred among the men of Ulster fell. Before morning Dubthach had massacred the girls of Ulster and Fergus had burned Emain.

Then they went to Connacht, to Ailill and Medb — not that this was a home for Ulstermen, but that they knew these two would protect them. A full three thousand the exiles numbered. For sixteen years they made sure that weeping and trembling never died away in Ulster; there was weeping and trembling at their hands every single night.

She was kept a year by Conchobor. In that time she never gave one smile, nor took enough food or sleep, nor lifted up her head from her knees. If they sent musicians to her, she would say this following poem:

‘Sweet in your sight the fiery stride
of raiding men returned to Emain.
More nobly strode the three proud
sons of Uisliu toward their home:

Noisiu bearing the best mead
—I would wash him by the fire —
Ardán, with a stag or a boar,
Anle, shouldering his load.

The son of Nes, battle-proud,
drinks, you say, the choicest mead.
Choicer still — a brimming sea —
I have taken frequently.

Modest Noisiu would prepare
a cooking-pit in the forest floor.
Sweeter than any meat
the son of Uisliu's, honey-sweet.

Though for you the times are sweet
with pipers and with trumpeters,
I swear today I can't forget
that I have known far sweeter airs.

Conchobor your king may take delight
in pipers and in trumpeters
— I have known a sweeter thing,
the three sons' triumphant song.

Noisiu's voice a wave roar,
a sweet sound to hear forever;
Ardán's bright baritone;
Anle, the hunter's, high tenor.

Noisiu: his grave-mound is made
and mournfully accompanied.
The highest hero — and I poured
the deadly potion when he died.

His cropped gold fleece I loved,
and fine form — a tall tree.
Alas, I needn't watch today,
nor wait for the son of Uisliu.

I loved the modest, mighty warrior,
loved his fitting, firm desire,
loved him at daybreak as he dressed
by the margin of the forest.

Those blue eyes that melted women,
and menaced enemies, I loved;
then, with our forest journey done,
his chanting through the dark woods.

I don't sleep now,
nor redden my fingernails.
What have I to do with welcomes?
The son of Indel will not come.

I can't sleep,
lying there half the night.
These crowds — I am driven out of my mind.
I can neither eat nor smile.

What use for welcome have I now
with all these nobles crowding Emain?
Comfortless, no peace nor joy,
nor mansion nor pleasant ornament.'

If Conchobor tried to soothe her, she would chant this following poem:

'Conchobor, what are you thinking, you
that piled up sorrow over woe?
Truly, however long I live,
I cannot spare you much love.

The thing most dear to me in the world,
the very thing I most loved,
your harsh crime took from me.
I will not see him till I die.

I feel his lack, wearily,
the son of Uisliu. All I see —
black boulders on fair flesh
so bright once among the others.

Red-cheeked, sweet as the river-brink;
red-lipped; brows beetle-black;
pearly teeth gleaming bright
with a noble snowy light.

His figure easiest to find,
bright among Alba's fighting-men
— a border made of red gold
matched his handsome crimson cloak.

A soft multitude of jewels
in the satin tunic — itself a jewel:
for decoration, all told,
fifty ounces of light gold.

He carried a gold-hilted sword
and two javelins sharply tipped,
a shield rimmed with yellow gold
with a knob of silver at the middle.

Fergus did an injury
bringing us over the great sea.

How his deeds of valour shrank
when he sold honour for a drink!

If all Ulster's warriors
were gathered on this plain, Conchobor,
I would gladly give them all
for Noisiu, son of Uisliu.

Break my heart no more today.
In a short while I'll be no more.
Grief is heavier than the sea,
if you were but wise, Conchobor.'

'What do you see that you hate most?' Conchobor said.

'You, surely,' she said, 'and Eogan mac Durthacht!'

'Go and live for a year with Eogan, then,' Conchobor said.

Then he sent her over to Eogan.

They set out the next day for the fair of Macha. She was behind Eogan in the chariot. She had sworn that two men alive in the world together would never have her.

'This is good, Derdriu,' Conchobor said. 'Between me and Eogan you are a sheep eyeing two rams.'

A big block of stone was in front of her. She let her head be driven against the stone, and made a mass of fragments of it, **and she was dead.**



Cúchulainn:



HOW CUCHULAINN WAS BEGOTTEN

CONCHOBOR and the nobles of Ulster were at Emain. A flock of birds came to Emain Plain and ate all the plants and grasses out of the ground, and the very roots. The men of Ulster grew angry seeing their land ruined, and got nine chariots ready the same day to chase them away — they were practised hunters of birds. Conchobor mounted the chariot with his sister, the woman [Deichtine](#); she drove the chariot for her brother. The Ulster warriors, Conall and Laegaire and the others, came in their chariots, and Bricriu with them.

The birds flew at will before them across Sliab Fuait, and across Edmonn and Breg Plain — there were no dikes or fences or stone walls in Ireland at that time, only the open plain. Pleasant and lovely was the flight of the birds, and their song. There were nine scores of birds with a silver chain between each couple. Each score went in its own flight, nine flights altogether, and two birds out in front of each flight with a yoke of silver between them. Toward nightfall three birds separated out from the rest.

The men of Ulster pressed on until they reached [Brug on the Boann river](#), and night overtook them there. It snowed heavily upon them, and Conchobor told his people to unyoke their chariots and start looking for a shelter. Conall and Bricriu searched about and found a solitary house, newly built. They went up to it and found a couple there and were made welcome. But when they returned to their people, Bricriu said it was useless to go there unless they brought their own food and set the table themselves — that even so it would be meagre enough. Nevertheless, they went there with all their chariots, and crowded with difficulty into the house. Soon they found the door of the store-room, and by their usual mealtime the men of Ulster were drunk with their welcome and in good humour.

Later, the man of the house told them his wife was in her birth-pangs in the store-room. Deichtine went in to her and helped her bear a son. At the same time a mare at the door of the house gave birth to two foals. The Ulstermen took charge of the baby boy and gave him the foals as a present, and Deichtine nursed him.

When morning came there was nothing to be seen eastward of the Brug — no house, no birds — only their own horses, the baby and the foals. They went back to Emain and reared the

baby until he was a boy.

He caught an illness then, and died. And they made a lamentation for him, and Deichtine's grief was great at the loss of her foster-son. She came home from lamenting him and grew thirsty and asked for a drink, and the drink was brought in a cup. She set it to her lips to drink from it and a tiny creature slipped into her mouth with the liquid. As she took the cup from her lips she swallowed the creature and it vanished.

She slept that night and dreamed that a man came toward her and spoke to her, saying she would bear a child by him — that it was he who had brought her to the Brug to sleep with her there, that the boy she had reared was his, that he was again planted in her womb and was to be called Sétanta, that he himself was [Lug mac Ethnenn](#), and that the foals should be reared with the boy.

The woman grew heavy with a child, and the people of Ulster made much of not knowing its father, saying it might have been Conchobor himself, in his drunkenness, that night she had stayed with him at the Brug.

Then Conchobor gave his sister in marriage to Sualdam mac Roich. She was ashamed to go pregnant to bed with her husband, and got sick when she reached the bedstead. The living thing spilled away in the sickness, and so she was made virgin and whole and went to her husband. She grew pregnant again and bore a son, [and called him Sétanta](#).

[The men of Ulster were assembled](#) in Emain Macha when her son was born, and they began arguing over which of them should rear the boy. They went to Conchobor for a decision.

‘You should take the boy,’ Conchobor said to his sister Finnchaem.

Finnchaem looked at the boy.

‘My heart is full of love for him already,’ she said, ‘as though he were my own Conall Cernach.’

‘It is only a little different for you,’ Bricriu said; ‘one your own son, and the other your sister’s son.’

‘Take the boy,’ Conchobor said again to his sister.

‘I should rear him,’ Sencha said, ‘and not Finnchaem. I am strong and skillful; I am noble and nimble in combat; I am a sage, knowing and careful. I have precedence over others in speaking with the king; I advise him before he speaks. I am judge of all combats before battle-proud Conchobor. I settle all judgments in Ulster, and offend no one. No one but Conchobor can equal me as a fosterfather.’

‘No: let me rear him,’ [Blai Briuga, a landed man](#), said. ‘He will be safe from harm and neglect with me. I could take all the men of Ireland in my house, and feed them for a week, or ten days. In their rashness and wrath I sustain them. In times of insult and trials of honour I support them. But let my just claim be settled as Conchobor desires.’

‘Have you no respect?’ Fergus said. ‘His wellbeing is my concern; I will rear him. I am strong and skillful, and a king’s messenger. No one can match me for rank or riches. I am sharp in courage and the craft of arms. My honour is my constant care — I was made to mind fostersons! I shelter the miserable, scourge the strong, watch over the weak.’

‘Listen to me,’ Amargin said, ‘and don’t turn away. I am worthy to bring up a king. I am renowned for every quality — for my deeds and wisdom and wealth, for eloquence and openness of mind, for the splendour and courage of my family. If I were not already a prince I would be worthy, as poet, of the royal favour. I can kill any chariot-fighter. I look for no one’s thanks but Conchobor’s. I am bound to no one but the king.’

‘There is nothing to gain from this,’ Conchobor said.

‘Let Finnchaem have the boy [until we reach Emain](#), and the judge Morann can decide.’

They set out for Emain, the boy with Finnchaem. When they reached Emain, Morann gave judgment and said:

‘He should be given to Conchobor, for he is Finnchaem’s kin. Sencha can teach him eloquence and oratory, Blai Briuga can provide for him, Fergus can take him on his knee, Amargin can be his teacher, with Conall Cernach as foster-brother. The teats of a mother Finnchaem can supply. In this manner he will be formed by all — chariot-fighter, prince and sage. He will be cherished by many, this boy, and he will settle your trials of honour and win your ford-fights and all your battles.’

That is what was done: he was given to Amargin and Finnchaem and reared at Imrith Fort on Murtheimne Plain.

CUCHULAINN’S COURTSHIP OF EMER, AND HIS TRAINING IN ARMS

THE MEN of Ulster were with Conchobor in Emain Macha one time, drinking from the vat [Ol nguala](#). It could hold a hundred measures of coal-black drink, enough to fill the men of Ulster for the whole evening at one sitting.

The Ulster chariot-warriors were practising on spearcords stretched the length of the house from one door to the other, two hundred and five feet. The feats they performed were the apple-feat and the feats of the javelin and the sword-edge, and their names were Conall Cernach, the triumphant, son of Amargin; Fergus mac Roich, bravest of the brave; Laegaire Buadach, the victorious, son of Connad; Celtchar mac Uthidir; Dubthach mac Lugdach; Cúchulainn mac Sualdaim; and Scél, the son of Bairdene who was doorkeeper of Emain Macha, and after whom ‘Bairdene’s Pass’ is named — Scél himself was a great storyteller. Cúchulainn outdid them all by his brilliance and nimbleness in the feats and the women of Ulster filled with love for him, seeing him so brilliant, clever and nimble of hand — and seeing also his fair face and fine figure. Cúchulainn had no wife at that time, and the men of Ulster met together to talk about him and about their wives’ and daughters’ passion for him. They said a woman would have to be found for Cúchulainn. A man with a wife of his own would be less likely to ruin their daughters and steal their wives’ love. There was the danger besides that Cúchulainn might die young and leave no son, which would be tragic: they knew it was only out of Cúchulainn himself that the likes of him might come again. For this reason also he should have a woman.

Conchobor sent nine men into each province of Ireland looking for a woman for Cúchulainn. They looked in every fort and every town of note in the country for a king’s daughter, or a noble’s or landowner’s, that Cúchulainn could take to wife. But after a year the messengers

came back without a girl to suit him.

Cúchulainn himself went to a place called the Gardens of Lug — Luglocha Logo — to woo a girl he knew there. Her name was Emer and she was the daughter of Forgall Monach, the cunning. Cúchulainn and his charioteer Laeg mac Riangaibra set out. No other chariot-team in Ulster, horses or warriors, could touch that chariot, with those warriors in it, for fire and speed.

Cúchulainn went up to the girl. She was out on the green with her foster-sisters, the daughters of landowners who lived around Forgall's fort. They were studying embroidery and fine stitching with Emer.

Cúchulainn greeted the troop of girls and Emer lifted up her lovely face. She recognised Cúchulainn, and said:

'May your road be blessed!'

'May the apple of your eye see only good,' he said.

Then they spoke together in riddles.

Cúchulainn caught sight of the girl's breasts over the top of her dress.

'I see a sweet country,' he said. *'I could rest my weapon there.'*

Emer answered him by saying:

'No man will travel this country until he has killed a hundred men at every ford from Scenmenn ford on the river Ailbine, to Banchuing — the 'Woman Yoke' that can hold a hundred — where the frothy Brea makes Fedelm leap.'

'In that sweet country I'll rest my weapon,' Cúchulainn said.

'No man will travel this country,' she said, *'until he has done the feat of the salmon-leap carrying twice his weight in gold, and struck down three groups of nine men with a single stroke, leaving the middle man of each nine unharmed.'*

'In that sweet country I'll rest my weapon,' Cúchulainn said.

'No man will travel this country,' she said, *'who hasn't gone sleepless from Samain, when the summer goes to its rest, until Imbolc, when the ewes are milked at spring's beginning; from Imbolc to Beltine at the summer's beginning and from Beltine to Brón Trogain, earth's sorrowing autumn.'*

'It is said and done,' Cúchulainn said.

He finished his journey and slept in Emain Macha that night.

The girls told their fathers how the warrior came in his marvellous chariot, about the talk with its hidden meanings that passed between him and Emer, and how he left them, going northward across Breg Plain. The landowners told it all to Forgall Monach, with everything that Emer said.

'Plainly,' Forgall Monach said, *'it was the warped one from Emain Macha. He came to talk with Emer, and the girl fell in love with him. That is what the two of them were talking about. But it will do them no good,'* he said. *'I'll put an end to it. They'll never have what they want.'*

Then Forgall Monach went to Emain Macha dressed in Gaulish clothes. He said that royal messengers from Gaul wished to speak with Conchobor, with tribute of gold and Gaulish wine

and other valuables. There were three of them and they were given a great welcome. On the third day he sent his people away.

Cúchulainn and Conall Cernach and other Ulster chariot-warriors were highly praised in his presence. He agreed they fought marvellously — though Cúchulainn, if only he could visit Domnall Míldemail, the war-like, in the land of Alba, would fight more marvellously still; while if he visited Scáthach, the Shadowy One, and studied the warrior's art with her, he could beat any hero in Europe. This he suggested in the hope that Cúchulainn would never come back, for he believed, if Cúchulainn married Emer, that somehow through the warrior's wildness and ferocity he himself would meet his death; this was the source of his fear.

Cúchulainn said he would go and Forgall made him promise to go immediately. Then, having got what he wanted from Cúchulainn, he left and started for home.

Next morning the hero rose up and set out to fulfil his promise. First he crossed Breg Plain to see Emer and talk with her before he set sail. She told him it was Forgall who had been in Emain and got him to go off studying warfare, to keep them apart. She warned him to be on his guard, for Forgall would try to destroy him wherever he went. Each of them promised to stay pure until they met again, unless the other died. Then they took leave of each other and he turned toward Alba.

He stayed with Domnall and was taught first the Pierced Flagstone, with the bellows blowing under it. He performed on it until his soles were blackened and discoloured. Next the 'Hero's Coil on the Spikes of Spears' — climbing up along a spear and performing on its point without making his soles bleed.

Finally Domnall told Cúchulainn his training wouldn't be finished until he visited Scáthach further east in Alba. So he travelled across Alba.

Cúchulainn's road took him to the camp where Scáthach's pupils lodged. He asked where she might be.

'On that island there,' they said.

'How can I get to her?' he said.

'By the Pupils' Bridge,' they said. 'But no one can cross that unless he is trained in the craft of arms.' (It was made low at each end and high in the middle; no sooner did a person step on to one end but the other flew up at him and threw him on his back.)

Three times Cúchulainn tried to cross the bridge but his best efforts failed, and the men jeered him. Then he went into his warp-spasm. He stepped to the head of the bridge and gave his hero's salmon-leap onto the middle. He reached the far end of the bridge so quickly it had no time to fly up at him. Then he sprang off onto the solid ground of the island and went up to the fort. He struck the gate with his spear-point and broke through it.

Scáthach was told about this.

'Plainly,' she said, 'this is someone who has had his full training somewhere.'

She sent her daughter Uathach out to meet the young man and see who he might be. Uathach saw him and fell silent, his sweet shape woke such desire in her. She gazed her fill at him and then went back to her mother. She told her mother about the man she had seen, and praised him.

'I can see he pleases you,' her mother said.

‘Yes, indeed,’ the girl said.

‘Take him to bed tonight,’ she said, ‘and sleep with him, if that is what you want.’

‘It would be no hardship,’ she said, ‘if he would like to.’

The girl looked after him with water and food, pretending to be a servant and welcoming and entertaining him. Later, Cúchulainn caught hold of her. But while he was overpowering her he hurt her finger and she cried out. Everyone in the fort heard her and they all started up. Cochar Cruibne, one of Scáthach’s soldiers and a very hardened man, rushed at Cúchulainn and they struggled and fought for a long time. Then Cochar tried his special tricks of battle but Cúchulainn parried them as if he had studied them all his life. Then he felled the champion and cut his head off. The woman Scáthach mourned at this, but Cúchulainn said he would take on the deeds and duties of the dead man and lead her army and be her strong champion.

Then Uathach came and conversed with Cúchulainn. After three days the girl told Cúchulainn, if he really wanted to learn heroic deeds, he must go where Scáthach was teaching her two sons Cúar and Cat, and give his hero’s salmon-leap up to the big yew-tree where she was resting, then put his sword between her breasts and make her promise three things: thoroughness in his training, a dowry for his marriage, and tidings of his future — for Scáthach was also a prophetess.

Cúchulainn went up to Scáthach and stood with his feet on the two edges of the weapon-chest and stripped his sword and put the point to her heart and said:

‘Death is hanging over you!’

‘I’ll give you any three things, the three highest desires of your heart,’ she said, ‘if you can ask them in one breath.’

Cúchulainn said what she had to give, and made her promise.

So Uathach lived with Cúchulainn and Scáthach taught him brave deeds and the craft of arms.

While Cúchulainn was staying with Scáthach in Alba and living with her daughter Uathach, another great man in Munster, a foster-brother of Cúchulainn, Lugaid mac Nois, who was the great king Alamiach’s son, came eastward with twelve chariot-warriors, all princes of Munster, to woo the twelve daughters of Coirpre Niafer mac Rosa Ruaid. But the girls were all betrothed to men already. Forgall Monach heard of this and came to Temair. He told Lugaid he had an unmarried girl at home who was the finest in Ireland for shapeliness and purity and tidiness. Lugaid was glad to hear it, and Forgall promised the girl to him, and the Breg landowners’ twelve daughters to Lugaid’s twelve princes as well.

The king came to Forgall’s fort for the wedding. Emer was brought to Lugaid’s place to sit at his hand, but she held his cheeks and swore on his life and honour that it was Cúchulainn she loved, that she was under Cúchulainn’s protection and that for anyone else to take her would be a crime against honour. Lugaid didn’t dare sleep with Emer then for dread of Cúchulainn, and he turned for home.

At this period Scáthach was at war with another territory whose chief was the woman Aife.

Their two armies gathered to give battle. Scáthach gave Cúchulainn a sleeping draught and tied him up, as a device to keep him out of battle, in case anything happened to him. But after one hour Cúchulainn sprang up straight from his sleep. A draught that would last another for twenty four hours lasted him only one.

He went out with Scáthach's two sons against three of Aife's soldiers, Cuar and Cat and Crufe, the three sons of Ilsúanach. Alone he reached the three of them and slew them. Battle was joined again next morning. The two armies came forward and lined up face to face. Three of Aife's soldiers, Ciri and Biri and Blaicne, sons of Eis Enchenn, the bird-headed, challenged Scáthach's two sons to combat. They chose the 'rope of feats' and Scáthach uttered a sigh, not knowing what would come of it. For one thing, her sons were only two men against three. For another, she dreaded Aife as the hardest woman warrior in the world. But Cúchulainn joined her two sons and sprang on to the cord and met the three and killed them.

Aife challenged Scáthach to single combat. Cúchulainn went up to Scathach and asked her what Aife held most dear above all else.

'The things she holds most dear,' Scáthach said, 'are her two horses, her chariot and her charioteer.'

Cúchulainn met and fought Aife on the rope of feats. Aife smashed Cúchulainn's weapon. All she left him was a part of his sword no bigger than a fist.

'Look! Oh, look!' Cúchulainn said. 'Aife's charioteer and her two horses and the chariot have fallen into the valley! They are all dead!'

Aife looked round and Cúchulainn leaped at her and seized her by the two breasts. He took her on his back like a sack, and brought her back to his own army. He threw her heavily to the ground and held a naked sword over her.

'A life for a life, Cúchulainn!' Aife said.

'Grant me three desires,' he said.

'What you can ask in one breath you may have,' she said.

'My three desires,' he said, 'are: hostages for Scáthach, and never attack her again; your company tonight at your own fort; and bear me a son.'

'I grant all you ask,' she said.

Cúchulainn went and slept the night with Aife.

Soon Aife said she was with child and would bear a boy.

'This day seven years I will send him to Ireland,' she said. 'But leave a name for him.'

Cúchulainn left him a gold thumb-ring and told her the boy was to come to Ireland to find him when his finger had grown to fit the ring. The name he gave him was Connla. He said Connla was to reveal this name to no man, that he must make way for no man, and refuse no man combat.

Then Cúchulainn went back to his own side.

He came back the way he had gone, and met a one-eyed hag in his path. She told him to get out of her way. He said that would leave him no room to pass except the sea-cliff below them. But she begged him to get out of her way. So he let her have the path, except where he clung by

his toes. She struck at his big toe as she passed him by, to knock him off the path down the cliff. But he saw her in time and gave his hero's salmon-leap upward. Then he struck off the hag's head. She was Eis Enchemn, the bird-headed, mother of the three last warriors to die at his hands. It was to avenge their ruin that she lay in wait for him.

Soon Scáthach and her army went home to their own country with the hostages that Aife gave them. Cúchulainn waited there until his wounds were healed.

So Cúchulainn's training with Scáthach in the craft of arms was done: what with *the apple-feat* — juggling nine apples with never more than one in his palm; the thunderfeat; the feats of the sword-edge and the sloped shield; the feats of the javelin and rope; the body-feat; the feat of Cat and the heroic salmon-leap; the pole-throw and the leap over a poisoned stroke; the noble chariot-fighter's crouch; *the gae bolga*; the spurt of speed; the feat of the chariotwheel thrown on high and the feat of the shield-rim; the breath-feat, with gold apples blown up into the air; the snapping mouth and the hero's scream; the stroke of precision; the stunning-shot and the cry-stroke; stepping on a lance in flight and straightening erect on its point; the sickle-chariot; and the trussing of a warrior on the points of spears.

A message came for him to come back to his own country. He bade them farewell. Scáthach spoke to him of his future and his end. She chanted to him through the *imbis forasnai*, the Light of Foresight. And this is what she told him:

I salute you —
weary after triumph,
battle eager, ice hearted!
Go where you'll find some comfort still
what comfort comes with most speed
what speed with most urgency
alone no matter where you stand
dire danger ever at hand
alone and ringed by envy
Cruachan's heroes you destroy
some heroes you protect
others lie broken necked
your straight sword stabs behind you
stained with Sétanta's own gore
red battle's distant roar
bones broken by the spear
horned herds hemmed in
the cruel club's hard edge
raw flesh battle's badge
cattle stolen out of Breg

your country under bondage
cattle straying on the ways
for five tear sodden days
hardship and a long sigh
one against an army
your own blood a red plague
splashed on many a smashed shield
on weapons and women red eyed
the field of slaughter growing red
on chopped flesh ravens feed
the crow scours the ploughed ground
the savage kite shall be found
herds broken up in wrath
great hosts driving the hordes
blood spilt in a great flood
Cúchulainn's body wasted
there are bitter wounds to bear
and warriors to slaughter
with your red stabbing spiked spear
grief and sorrow where you roam
murderous on Murtheimne Plain
playing at the stabbing game
now the crafty champion comes
in rage against a broken wave
heroic in his mighty acts
and harsh scream and cruel heart
let him come and women kill
and Medb fight with Ailill
a bed of sickness lies in wait
your breast full of fierce hate
hear the white horned bull roar
against the brown bull of Cuailnge
when will he come and when force
with sharp valour through the forest
arise versed in the bloody spike
and long sweeping strong stroke
and twisting run and lone attack

shake off weakness and neglect
arise once more and seize your arms
seasoned in the crafts of war
proud striding raider pitiless
for Ulster's land and virgin women
rise now in all your force
with warlike cruel wounding shield
and strong shafted curved spear
and straight sword dyed red
in dark gatherings of blood
men in Alba will know your name
in the winter night pity your wail
Aife and Uathach will pity
your sweet shape-changing bright body
stretched in sleep nobly broken
for three and thirty full years
all your enemies are yours
you will keep for thirty years
your sharp valour and your force
I will not add another year
nor tell more of your career
full of triumph and women's love
what matter how short.
I salute you.'

[Cúchulainn returned to Emain](#) and told all his adventures. When he was rested he went on toward Forgall's ramparts in Luglochta Logo to find Emer. So strong was the guard around her that after a whole year there he hadn't reached her. Then he faced Forgall's fort in earnest. That day the sickle-chariot was harnessed for him and he drove it in a heavy course and did a thunder-feat that slew three hundred and nine men.

He reached Forgall's rampart and gave his salmon-leap across the three enclosures to the middle of the fort. In the inner enclosure he dealt three strokes at three groups of nine men. He killed eight men at each stroke and left one man standing in the middle of each group. They were Emer's three brothers, Scibar and Ibor and Cat. Forgall sprang away in flight from Cúchulainn out across the fort's rampart, but he fell and killed himself. Cúchulainn caught Emer and her foster-sister, and their weight in gold and silver, and leaped again with the two girls across the triple ramparts and hurried on with shrieks rising around them on every side. Scenmenn caught up with them but Cúchulainn killed him. Ath Scenmenn, Scenmenn's Ford, is the name of the place where he died. They went onward and came to Glondáth. There

Cúchulainn killed one hundred men.

‘That was a great deed,’ Emer said, ‘to kill one hundred armed angry men.’

‘Glondáth, Ford of the Deed, will be its name forever,’ Cúchulainn said.

Cúchulainn reached Crúfóit — which until then was called Rae Ban, the White Plain. He dealt the army great mortal blows there and streams of blood broke over the place on every side.

‘You have made a hill of bloody sods today, Cúchulainn,’ the girl said.

After this it was called Crúfóit, Sod of Blood.

The pursuers came up with them at Ath Imfóit on the Boann river. Emer got out of the chariot and Cúchulainn gave chase after the pursuers with the sods flying from his horses’ hooves northward over the ford. Then he chased them northward and the sods flew southward from his horses’ hooves over the ford. So it is called Ath Imfóit, from the sods flying this way and that.

Thus it came about that Cúchulainn killed one hundred men at every ford from Ath Scenmenn at Ailbine to the Boann at Breg, doing all he had told the girl he would do.

He reached Emain Macha safely at nightfall. Emer was brought into the Craebruad before Conchobor and the other Ulster chiefs and they made her welcome. But there was a sour sharp-tongued man there, Bricriu mac Carbad, and he said:

‘Cúchulainn is going to find tonight’s doings very hard. This woman he has brought here will have to sleep tonight with Conchobor — the first forcing of girls in Ulster is always his.’

Cúchulainn grew wild at this and trembled so hard that the cushion burst under him and the feathers flew around the house. He rushed out.

‘This is very troublesome,’ Cathbad said. ‘The king can’t refuse to do as Bricriu says. Yet Cúchulainn would destroy any man who slept with his wife.’

‘Call Cúchulainn back,’ Conchobor said, ‘and we will try to cool his fever.’

Cúchulainn came in and Conchobor said:

‘Go and bring me back all the herds about Sliab Fuait.’

Cúchulainn went off and gathered together all the swine and wild deer and every kind of wild flying creatures he could find at Sliab Fuait, and drove them in one flock on to the green at Emain. His anger was gone.

The men of Ulster argued the affair and decided that Emer should sleep that night in Conchobor’s bed, but with Fergus and Cathbad in it as well to protect Cúchulainn’s honour. They said the whole of Ulster would bless the couple if he accepted. He accepted, and so it was done. Conchobor paid Emer’s dowry the next day, Cúchulainn was given his ‘honour-price,’ and he slept ever after with his wife. They never parted again until they died.

THE DEATH OF AIFE’S ONE SON

What caused Cúchulainn to kill his own son?

It is soon told.

SEVEN years to the day after Cúchulainn left [Aife](#), the boy came looking for his father. The men of Ulster were gathered at Tracht Esi, the Strand where the Mark is, when he came. They saw the boy coming toward them over the ocean in a little boat of bronze with gilt oars in his hands.

There was a pile of stones beside him in the boat. He put a stone in his sling and sent it humming at the sea birds, and stunned them without killing them. Then he let them escape into the air again. Then he did a feat with his jaws, between his hands, faster than the eye could follow, tuning his voice to bring them down a second time. Then he roused them again.

‘Well,’ Conchobor said, ‘I pity the country that boy is heading for. I don’t know what island he comes from, but their grown men can grind us into dust if one of their young boys can do that. Someone go out to meet him. Don’t let him ashore.’

‘Who ought to meet him?’

‘Who but Condere mac Echach?’ Conchobor said.

‘And why Condere?’ they all asked.

‘Clearly,’ Conchobor said, ‘where there is a need for good sense and eloquence, Condere is the right person.’

‘I’ll go and meet him,’ Condere said.

Condere went up to the boy just as he reached the strand.

‘You have come far enough, young man,’ Condere said, ‘until we find out where you come from and who your people are.’

‘I’ll give my name to no man,’ the boy said, ‘and I’ll make way for no man.’

‘You can’t land,’ Condere said, ‘unless you give your name.’

‘I am going where I am going,’ the boy said.

The boy moved to pass him, but Condere said:

‘Heed me my son.

Mighty are your acts

manly your blood

you have the pride

of an Ulster warrior

Conchobor would protect you

but you bare your jaws

and dare us with your little spears

and annoy our warriors

you have come to Conchobor

let him grant you protection.

Listen, pay heed.

Come to Conchobor

Nes’s swift son

to Sencha mac Ailella

full of victories
to Fintan's son Cethern
of the crimson blade
the fire that burns battalions
to the poet Amargin
to Cúscraid of the huge hosts
come into the care
of Conall Cernach
above story or song
or the shouts of heroes
gathered together
Blai Briuga would dislike it
if you pushed past him
or any warrior
however fine
the insult would hurt him
come let it be said
that Condere himself
arose and approached
the warlike boy
and held him back.

'I have sworn to oppose you, a beardless, unfledged boy,' Condere said, 'if you won't heed the men of Ulster.'

'You have come and spoken well,' the boy said, 'so I will answer you:

'I tuned my voice:
from little jaws
a straight shot sped
with my little spears
flung from afar
I gathered together
a lovely bird flock
no need of my hero's
salmon leap
by such brave acts
I have sworn no man
will stand in my way
go back to Ulster
and say I'll fight them
singly or together.

‘Turn aside,’ the boy said, ‘for even though you had the strength of a hundred men you couldn’t hold me back.’

‘Very well,’ Condere said, ‘someone else can try.’

Condere went back to the men of Ulster and told them.

‘No one makes little of Ulster’s honour while I live.’ Conall Cernach said. ‘I won’t permit it.’

He went out to meet the boy.

‘Those were pretty games, boy,’ Conall said.

‘They’ll work just as nicely on you,’ the boy said.

He set a stone in his sling and sent it in a stunning-shot into the sky. The roar of its thunder as it rose reached Conall and knocked him headlong. Before he could rise the boy had the shield-strap tied around Conall’s arms.

‘Send out someone else!’ Conall said, but the whole army was put to shame.

Then Cúchulainn advanced on the boy, performing his feats as he came. Forgall’s daughter Emer had her arm round his neck. She said:

‘Don’t go down!
It is your own son there
 don’t murder your son
the wild and well born
 son let him be
is it good or wise
 for you to fall
on your marvellous son
 of the mighty acts
remember Scáthach’s
 strict warning and turn
from this flesh agony
 this twig from your tree
if Connla has dared us
 he has justified it.

Turn back, hear me!
My restraint is reason
 Cúchulainn hear it
we know his name
 if he is really Connla
the boy is Aife’s
 one son.’

Then Cúchulainn said:

‘Be quiet, wife.
It isn’t a woman
that I need now
to hold me back
in the face of these feats
and shining triumph
I want no woman’s
help with my work
victorious deeds
are what we need
to fill the eyes
of a great king
the blood of Connla’s
body will flush
my skin with power
little spear so fine
to be finely sucked
by my own spears!

‘No matter who he is, wife,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘I must kill him for the honour of Ulster.’

So he went down to meet him.

Those were pretty games, boy,’ he said.

‘Prettier than the games I’m finding here,’ the young boy said. ‘Two of you have come down here and still I haven’t named myself.’

‘Maybe you were meant to meet me,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘Name yourself, or you die.’

‘So be it!’ the boy said.

The boy set upon him and they struck at one another. The boy cut him bald-headed with his sword, in the stroke of precision.

‘The joking has come to a head!’ Cúchulainn said. ‘Now we’ll wrestle.’

‘I can’t reach up to your belt,’ the boy said.

He climbed up onto two standing stones. Without moving a foot he trust Cúchulainn three times between the two stones. His feet sank in the stone up to the ankle. The marks of his feet are there still, which is why the people of Ulster call it *Tráig*, or *Tracht*, *Esi*, the Strand of the Mark.

They went down into the sea to drown each other, and the boy submerged him twice. Then Cúchulainn turned and played the boy foul in the water with the *gae bolga*, that Scáthach had taught to no one but him. He sent it speeding over the water at him and brought his bowels down around his feet.

‘There is something Scáthach didn’t teach me,’ the boy said. ‘You have wounded me woefully.’

‘I have,’ Cúchulainn said.

He took the boy in his arms and carried him away from the place and brought him and laid him down before the people of Ulster.

‘My son, men of Ulster,’ he said. ‘Here you are.’

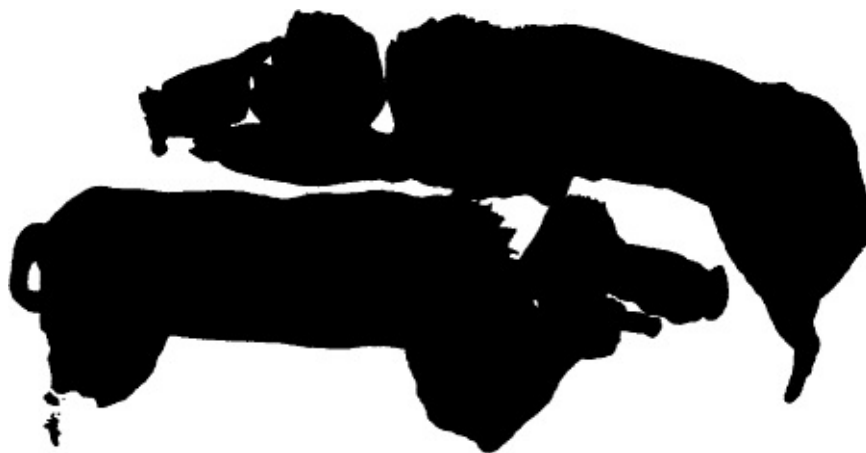
‘Alas, alas!’ said all Ulster.

‘It is the truth,’ the boy said. ‘If only I had five years among you I would slaughter the warriors of the world for you. You would rule as far as Rome. But since it is like this, point me out the famous men around me. I would like to salute them.’

He put his arms round the neck of each man in turn, and saluted his father, and then died. Then a loud lament was uttered for him. His grave was made and the gravestone set. For the space of three days and nights no calf in **Ulster** was let go to its cow on account of his death.



THE QUARREL OF THE TWO PIG-KEEPERS, AND HOW THE BULLS WERE BEGOTTEN



What caused the two pig-keepers to quarrel?

It is soon told.

THERE was bad blood between Ochall Ochne, the king of the *síd* in Connacht, and Bodb, king of the Munster *síd*. (Bodb's *síd* is the 'Sid ar Femen,' the *síd* on Femen Plain; Ochall's is the *síd* at Cruachan.) They had two pig-keepers, called Friuch, after a boar's bristle, and Rucht, after its grunt. Friuch was Bodb's pig-keeper, Rucht was Ochall's, and they were good friends. They were both practised in the pagan arts and could form themselves into any shape, like *Mongán mac Fiachna*.

The two pig-keepers were on such good terms that the one from the north would bring his pigs down with him when there was a mast of oak and beech nuts in Munster. If the mast fell in the north the pig-keeper from the south would travel northward.

There were some who tried to make trouble between them. People in Connacht said their pig-keeper had the greater power, while others in Munster said it was theirs who had greater power. A great mast fell in Munster one year, and the pig-keeper from the north came southward with his pigs. His friend made him welcome.

'Is it you?' he said. 'They are trying to cause trouble between us. Men here say your power is greater than mine.'

'It is no less, anyway,' Ochall's pig-keeper said.

'That's something we can test,' Bodb's pig-keeper said. 'I'll cast a spell over your pigs. Even though they eat this mast they won't grow fat, while mine will.'

And that is what happened. Ochall's pig-keeper had to bring his pigs away with him so lean and wretched that they hardly reached home. Everybody laughed at him as he entered his country.

'It was a bad day you set out,' they said. 'Your friend has greater power than you.'

'It proves nothing,' he said. 'We'll have mast here in our own turn and I'll play the same trick on him.'

This also happened. Bodb's pig-keeper came northward the same time next year into the country of Connacht, bringing his lean pigs with him, and Ochall's pig-keeper did the same to them, and they withered. Everybody said then that they had equal power. Bodb's pig-keeper came back from the north with his lean pigs, and Bodb dismissed him from pig-keeping. His friend in the north was also dismissed.

After this they spent two full years in the shape of birds of prey, the first year at the fort of Cruachan, in north Connacht, and the second at the *síd* on Femen Plain. One day the men of Munster had collected together at this place.

'Those birds are making a terrible babble over there,' they said. 'They have been quarrelling and behaving like this for a full year now.'

As they were talking they saw Fuidell mac Fiadmire, Ochall's steward, coming toward them up the hill and they made him welcome.

'Those birds are making a great babble over there,' he said. 'You would swear they were the same two birds we had back north last year. They kept this up for a whole year.'

Then they saw the two birds of prey turn suddenly into human shape and become the two

pig-keepers. They made them welcome.

‘You can spare your welcome,’ Bodb’s pig-keeper said. ‘We bring you only war-wailing and a fullness of friends’ corpses.’

‘What have you been doing?’ Bodb said.

‘Nothing good,’ he said. ‘From the day we left until today we spent two full years together in the shape of birds. You saw what we did over there. A whole year went like that at Cruachan and a year at the *síd* on Femen Plain so that all men, north and south, have seen our power. Now we are going to take the shape of water creatures and live two years under the sea.’

They left and each went his own way. One entered the Sinann river, the other the river Siuir, and they spent two full years under water. One year they were seen devouring each other in the Siuir, the next in the Sinann.

Next they turned into two stags, and each gathered up the other’s herd of young deer and made a shambles of his dwelling place.

Then they became two warriors, gashing each other.

Then two phantoms, terrifying each other.

Then two dragons, pouring down snow on each other’s land.

They dropped down then out of the air, and became two maggots. One of them got into the spring of the river Cronn in Cuailnge, where a cow belonging to Dáire mac Fiachna drank it up. The other got into the well-spring Garad in Connacht, where a cow belonging to Medb and Ailill drank it. From them, in this way, sprang the two bulls, Finnbennach, the white-horned, of Ai Plain, and Dub, the dark bull of Cuailnge.

Rucht and Friuch were their names when they were pig-keepers; Ingen and Eitte, Talon and Wing, when they were two birds of prey; Bled and Blod, Whale and Seabeast, when they were two undersea creatures; Rinn and Faebur, Point and Edge, when they were two warriors; Scáth and Sciath, Shadow and Shield, when they were two phantoms; and Cruinniuc and Tuinniuc when they were two maggots. Finnbennach Ai, the White, and **Donn Cuailnge**, the Brown, were their names when they were two bulls.

This was the Brown Bull of Cuailnge —
dark brown dire haughty with young health
horrific overwhelming ferocious
full of craft
furious fiery flanks narrow
brave brutal thick breasted
curly browed head cocked high
growling and eyes glaring
tough maned neck thick and strong
snorting mighty in muzzle and eye

with a true bull's brow
and a wave's charge
and a royal wrath
and the rush of a bear
and a beast's rage
and a bandit's stab
and a lion's fury.
Thirty grown boys could take
their place from rump to nape
— [a hero to his herd at morning](#)
foolhardy at the herd's head
to his cows the beloved
to husbandmen a prop
the father of great beasts
[overlooks the ox of the earth.](#)

A white head and white feet
had the Bull Finnbennach
and a red body the colour of blood
as if bathed in blood
or dyed in the red bog
or pounded in purple
with his blank paps
under breast and back
and his heavy mane and great hoofs
the beloved of the cows of Ai
with ponderous tail
and a stallion's breast
and a cow's eye apple
and a salmon's snout
and hinder haunch
he romps in rut
born to bear victory
bellowing in greatness
idol of the ox herd
the prime demon Finnbennach.